

AVA OPPOSES THE CLOSURE OF REGIONAL VETERINARY LABORATORIES.

- The Beale Review into the Australian biosecurity arrangements recommends

“The National Biosecurity Authority should ensure Australia has the laboratory capability and capacity to manage exotic pest and disease incursions of national significance. The Panel recommends that the Authority, working with the states and territories, should improve the quality and use of state and territory laboratories to support national biosecurity priorities”

- **Loss of veterinary pathology expertise.**

There will be a significant loss from the veterinary pathology talent pool. Most of the displaced veterinary pathologists are unlikely to relocate to EMAI and most are presently seeking alternative employment. Some will retire, others take up positions overseas and others leave the industry.

There is already an emerging shortage of highly qualified veterinary pathologists, due to impending retirements and competing career alternatives. Animal Health Australia has produced a paper highlighting these issues and the need to fund postgraduate training in this discipline or face severe shortages at a time of increasing biosecurity risks to Australia.

These laboratories also employ technical staff with skills in diagnostic parasitology, histotechnology, serology, haematology and microbiology (including molecular biology). These people will also lose their jobs.

The loss of the vast experience of these people will seriously compromise the nation's ability to respond to emergency animal diseases.

Experienced pathologists are needed for the continued health and welfare of our state's animals, people and economy.

- **Timing of the Closures**

The closure of the regional veterinary laboratories will occur sometime before June 2009, while the projected \$43 million upgrade of the EMAI facilities is a five year project.

There are staff members who were relocated to EMAI after the closure of the Armidale and Wagga veterinary laboratories that are still housed in demountables. Why are the laboratories being closed before EMAI upgrades are completed?

These are also concerns as to whether the upgrade will be completed if there is a change in government or there are more budgetary cuts required.

- **Decrease in laboratory capacity**

While the EMAI laboratory may be able to cope with a normal increase in the volume of samples from the closure of the regional laboratories, what would happen in a time of challenge from a suspected or actual outbreak such as Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD)?

- **The impact to these regional farming communities**

The laboratory staff have been readily accessible and are consulted regularly by local practitioners and producers. They are highly knowledgeable about the region's animals, climate and pasture conditions. The regional laboratory at Orange is located where the Department of Primary Industries headquarters is; surely that provides the staff at the DPI headquarters with invaluable direct contact with the regional laboratory pathologists.

The regional laboratories employ rural people in rural jobs. The last thing any rural community needs is the closure of important facilities that employ professionals who can then contribute back to these communities in other ways.

➤ **Logistics associate with centralised laboratory**

The centralisation of the veterinary services will see an increase in the turn around time with the need for courier services. In the event of the outbreak of an exotic disease such as FMD this may make a major difference in the control of the spread of the disease. The Productivity Commission estimated in 2002 the Gross Domestic Product impact of an FMD outbreak in Australia at \$2 to \$3 billion for a short outbreak, rising to between \$8 and \$13 billion for a 12 month outbreak.

Presently local practitioners can deliver samples to the Orange laboratory 7 days a week. Courier services to EMAI are presently unable to provide an adequate service in the case of an emergency. Currently fresh carcasses are presented the regional laboratories by local practitioners; this will not be possible using courier services. It has historically been a problem getting a courier to Menangle on a Saturday, meaning it will be virtually impossible to get fresh samples to a laboratory from anything between Thursday lunchtime and Monday lunchtime. This also increases the risk of spoilage of samples.

➤ **Implication to our Export Trade**

With the increase of globalisation, emerging new diseases in Australia and increased disease surveillance requirement from our overseas markets it is important that surveillance systems are enhanced. The closure of the laboratories risks a degradation of our current surveillance.

➤ **Profitability of the Regional Veterinary Laboratories**

The Minister stated in a media interview that the reasons for closure of the laboratories were because they were non profitable. Profit generation is not the goal of these laboratories, rather it is disease surveillance and protection for our primary industries. Over the last couple of years, these laboratories have been downgraded with large numbers of samples, except those for Johnes Disease, being redirected to EMAI, a governmental policy that has lead to the unprofitability that they then use as an excuse to close down the laboratories.

In 1985, the NSW Government in an attempt to make savings, closed the Wagga Wagga regional veterinary laboratory. A subsequent inquiry found the closure did not result in any saving.

➤ **Overall government spending on animal health.**

The closure of the regional laboratories is all part of the NSW government's program to strip costs from the Department of Primary industry. Over the last few years there has been a "continued decline of our veterinary resources in the government sector, in food and other large animal practice and especially in the laboratory" (Mark Lawrie, AVJ August 2008). It is of concern that government already has plans to sell the site of the Orange laboratory for housing development.